

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART III THE POWERS OF THE INTELLECT

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:  
COGNITIVE POWER AND ITS ACTS:  
CONCEPTION, JUDGMENT, REASONING

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ARISTOTLE'S *Metaphysics* begins with the words "Man by nature desires to know." Aristotle might have added that man's natural desire for knowledge as a good to be sought is realized by man's natural ability to learn and thereby to acquire knowledge.

In these two facts about human nature we have evidence of two basic powers of the human intellect: the appetitive and the cognitive. These two powers are irreducible. They are interactive and cooperative. Desiring is not knowing, but we cannot desire without knowing the object to be sought. Knowing is not desiring, but we do not learn very much without being impelled to do so by desire.

Being an animal with an intellect as well as senses, man shares with other animals additional powers—many sensitive powers and a locomotive power. The cognitive power in man is, therefore, twofold: sensitive and intellectual.

The appetitive power in man is similarly twofold. Man's desires are both sensual and intellectual. He has sensual desires that spring from or accompany his emotions or passions, as well as an intellectual appetite that is man's will.

The locomotive power that humans share with other animals underlies the sphere of all of man's overt behavior that expresses itself in the voluntary movements of the organs of his body. These are set in motion by his will and by his sensuous desires, two forms of appetite that sometimes cooperate but are more often in conflict. I will deal with their conflict and cooperation in chapter

15 on the relation of the passions to the reason; and in chapter 14, I will deal with man's intellectual appetite and with questions about his will and its freedom.

Before we turn to the intellect's cognitive power, it would seem reasonable to ask whether these two intellectual powers—the cognitive and the appetitive—exhaust the potentialities that having an intellect confers upon human beings. Subordinate divisions of each of these powers may have to be distinguished, and subordinate developments of each may occur through habit formation. But is there any third basic potentiality in human nature that, on the sensitive side, man shares with other animals, and, on the intellectual side, is uniquely his?

The answer is negative. In the history of psychology, modern as well as ancient, we find a threefold division of human consciousness and behavior into states or phases called cognitive, conative, and affective. The word "conative" covers the same ground for which I have used the word "appetitive." What does the word "affective" add? So far as emotions involve desires and drives that lead to action, the emotions are appetitive on the sensitive side of human consciousness and behavior.

What more is there that has been overlooked? The affects: feelings of pleasure and displeasure, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, contentment and discontent, elation and depression, and so on.

Do these affects point to a third natural power, either of the intellect or of the senses? I think not. In the preceding chapter I distinguished between active and passive potentialities and identified powers with active potentialities. The affects, in my judgment, are actualizations of a passive potentiality, not of a power, either intellectual or sensitive. They are all passions, minor or major.

The fact that the intellect's cognitive and appetitive powers cooperate in human action leads to the first distinction we must make with regard to the operations of the intellect in the sphere of its cognitive power. That is the traditional distinction between the speculative or theoretical intellect and the practical intellect.

The operations of the intellect's cognitive power—the power to apprehend, judge, and reason, to understand and know—are speculative or theoretical if the end for which they are performed is knowledge and understanding for their own sake. However, if they are performed for the sake of carrying out a decision or executing a choice in overt behavior that is activity in the pursuit of some goal,

then the intellectual operations are practical. The distinction between the speculative and the practical intellect arises from the division of the intellect's cognitive operations into those two spheres according to the different ends they serve.

It was necessary to call attention to this distinction because the cognitive activities of the practical intellect are so different from the cognitive activities of the speculative intellect. Let us begin with a consideration of the latter.

Three quite different kinds of action exhaust the activities of the speculative intellect. All three are cognitive acts: they all eventuate in knowing or understanding. They are ordered serially, the first being indispensable to the second, and the second being indispensable to the third. These three distinct types of action indicate three specific divisions of man's generic cognitive power.

The first act of the speculative intellect is conception. Each act of conception is an intuitive apprehension of an object of thought. Calling it intuitive amounts to saying that it is nonassertive and nondiscursive. Calling it intuitive also makes this intellectual act analogous to the sensitive act of perception. As the former intuitively apprehends an intelligible object, so the latter intuitively apprehends a sensible object.

The second act of the intellect, employing the conceptions produced by its first act, is judgment. A judgment is assertive, not intuitive. It affirms or denies the relation between two objects of thought, expressed in the assertion that the intelligible object X does or does not stand in a certain relation to the intelligible object Y.

We need not be concerned here with the great variety of relations between intelligible objects that can be either affirmed or denied by our intellectual judgments, expressed in an equally great variety of propositions or statements. But we must note a basic distinction between two main types of intellectual judgments—judgments having or not having existential import.

In the sphere of sense-perception, I have pointed out on several earlier occasions that the act of perception is inseparably an act of apprehension and an act of judgment, at once both apprehensive and assertive. I cannot truthfully say that I apprehend something perceptually without at the same time making the judgment that that something really exists.

In this respect, intellectual apprehension and judgment differ radically from apprehension and judgment in the case of sense perception. The two acts that are inseparable in the sensitive sphere are quite separate in the intellectual sphere.

When by conception I intuitively apprehend any intelligible object of thought, I always confront the question: Does that object exist, in reality? I may not always be able to answer that question correctly, but I must always ask it because the mere apprehension of the intelligible object of my conceptual thought leaves quite open the question whether or not in reality there are one or more instances of it in existence. If I can answer that question affirmatively, I make an existential judgment that is true.

The first act of the intellect, whereby we apprehend an intelligible object of thought, is neither true nor false. It cannot be either because it asserts nothing. Only our intellectual judgments can be either true or false, for their assertion or denial that something exists, as well as their assertion or denial of a relation between this and that object of thought, can be tested for correspondence with what exists in reality and with the ways things are in fact related.

In the transition from conception to judgment, we pass from an intuitive and apprehensive act of the intellect to an assertive act into which conceptions enter as components, either asserted to exist or judged to be related in one way or another.

The next transition, from the second to the third act of the intellect, is from judgments to reasoning or ratiocination. It is a transition from a number of assertive acts of judgment to a discursive sequence of those acts in the process of inference.

All the many forms of valid reasoning and the many types of ratiocination involve inferences from one or more positive or negative judgments asserted to be true. These true premises cogently necessitate a conclusion—an affirmative or negative judgment—that must be asserted to be true.

Only acts of judgment are either true or false with certitude or probability. As we have seen, acts of conception, being merely the intuitive apprehension of intelligible objects (which may or may not exist in reality) are neither true nor false. We now see that the discursive process of reasoning or inference is also neither true nor false.

Reasoning or inference is valid or not, cogent or not, which means that, by the rules of one or another logic, it is correct or incorrect. When the reasoning or inference is correct, the truth of the asserted premises necessitates the truth of the conclusion. The truth of the necessitated conclusion is either certain or probable, depending on the truth-value attached to the premises asserted.

Not all judgments asserted as true are the conclusions of deductive reasoning, for if that were so there would be no assertible principles—no initial premises—and reasoning would be involved in an endless regress. Induction is the source from which reasoning takes its start. Induction itself is not a process of reasoning but rather an act of generalization from experience. In this respect it is like conception, which is an act of abstraction from experience.

The two kinds of induction that furnish the intellect with the principles or initial premises for deductive reasoning are intuitive induction and experimental induction. The few self-evident principles that we can assert as self-evidently true are the products of intuitive induction. From just one example of a triangle without diagonals in it and of a square with two diagonals in it, we can assert with certitude that no triangle can have diagonals in it. That is an intuitive induction of a self-evident truth.

Experimental induction is also intuitive in the sense that it is a generalization from a single instance—a carefully constructed experiment in which all relevant conditions have been controlled and from which all irrelevant factors have been excluded. Here the assertion of the generalization lacks the certitude of a self-evident truth because we can never be certain that the crucial experiment meets all the requirements of the ideal—*all* relevant conditions controlled, all irrelevant factors excluded.

There is a third kind of induction, which I shall call statistical, because unlike intuitive and experimental induction the generalization achieved is a judgment based on a large number of particular instances and upon an assessment of their frequency. If both positive and negative instances occur, the generalization will take the form of a statistical estimate of the probability that such and such is the case. An unqualified generalization that uses the word “all,” as, for example, the judgment that all swans are white, can be falsified by one negative instance and replaced by a statistical estimate of the likelihood that more swans will be found that are white than are black.

When we say that some relatively few judgments are self-evidently true, we are saying that they are undeniable because it is impossible for the intellect to judge otherwise. Such self-evidently true judgments are also necessarily true and indemonstrable. Like the products of experimental induction, they are judgments that cannot be asserted as conclusions of valid reasoning or inference. Yet they can be regarded as knowledge.

Of the remaining judgments of the intellect, only those that are asserted to be certainly or probably true as the conclusions of valid inference or correct reasoning can be regarded as having the status of knowledge, either with certitude or probability. All judgments other than those that are self-evidently or experimentally true, or validly asserted to be true as correctly inferred conclusions, have the status of unsupported opinion, not that of certain or probable knowledge.

It is important for us to recognize this distinction between the judgments we make that have the status of knowledge and those that have the status of unsupported opinion. Some of our unsupported opinions may become supportable by effort on our part to discover the reasons for thinking them to have some measure of truth. That effort will succeed only if we can do the reasoning that turns what was before only an opinion into conclusions of a logically correct inference from premises that can be asserted as true judgments. For both the speculative and the practical use of the intellect, it is important to replace opinion with knowledge.

As I have already pointed out, we use such words as “thought” and “thinking” loosely when we talk about our intellectual activities. Greater precision can be introduced into our speech by identifying the act of thought with the first act of the intellect: the act of conception, or of apprehending intelligible objects. The process of thinking should be identified with the third act of the intellect: the discursive process of reasoning or inference.

The second act of the intellect—an existential or non-existential judgment—should be identified with an act of knowing or opining. In distinction from acts of knowing or opining, what we call understanding should be identified with the first act of the intellect, for unlike knowing and opining, which always involve judging, understanding is always the intuitive apprehension of one or another intelligible object or object of thought.

We sometimes refer to intelligible objects as ideas, using that word for objects in our public experience, not in its subjective sense to

refer to the private contents of our minds. I mention this to call attention to an important difference between knowing and understanding. Knowledge is always about matters of fact, never about ideas. Understanding is always of ideas. We do not *know* the ideas of liberty or of justice. We *understand* liberty or justice when engaged in the intellectual activity that consists in apprehending those intelligible objects conceptually. Judgments and inferences may follow such thought, but only for the sake of clarifying our conceptual understanding.

All the acts so far mentioned in the foregoing analysis of intellectual activity in its speculative dimension fall within the sphere of the intellect's cognitive power. Cognition is not confined to acts of knowing. It includes acts of thought and of thinking as well—acts of understanding and of reasoning or inference. Even the act of opining parades as a counterfeit of cognition.

When we turn from the speculative to the practical intellect, the same three acts—of conception, judgment, and reasoning—also occur, but with certain differences now to be noted.

The act of conception involves the understanding of intelligible goods. All the overt behavior to which activity on the part of the practical intellect leads is in the realm of good and evil, things to be desired or avoided, and, if desirable, things to be sought as ends or chosen as means.

The process of reasoning, often called deliberation in the practical dimension of the intellect, differs from reasoning or inference in the speculative dimension by virtue of its requiring two quite different kinds of judgment.

One kind is the same kind of descriptive judgment about matters of fact that, in the speculative dimension, we have classified as existential or non-existential. The other kind, which is required only in practical reasoning, is a prescriptive judgment, a judgment that asserts what ought to be desired—what ends ought to be sought and what means ought to be chosen.

Descriptive judgments, either having or not having existential import, assert what is or is not the case as a matter of fact. In the sphere of the practical intellect, they assert what is in fact desired or not desired by human beings, individually or in groups. In sharp contrast, prescriptive judgments assert what ought to be desired whether in fact such things are or are not desired.

Not only are descriptive and prescriptive judgments clearly different, but so are the standards of truth that apply to them. The criterion of the truth of all descriptive judgments is, as I have said, the correspondence of the judgment with reality. There is no reality with which a prescriptive judgment can correspond. That is why some twentieth century philosophers have concluded that all prescriptive judgments are mere opinions that cannot be tested for truth or falsity.

In the fourth century B.C., Aristotle proposed a standard of truth for prescriptive judgments. Instead of correspondence with reality, he proposed that a prescriptive judgment—an ought judgment be regarded as true if it conforms to right desire. Right desire thus becomes the criterion for the truth of the prescriptive judgments that are involved in practical reasoning.\*

\*I have discussed this criterion and explained how it works in earlier books. See *Six Great Ideas* (1981), chapters 10-11, and *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985), chapter 5.

The process of practical reasoning is more complex than the reasoning done in mathematics, in the theoretical sciences, and in speculative philosophy. Its greater complexity lies in the fact that it moves forward on three successive levels, whereas all speculative or theoretic reasoning occurs on the same level.

The highest of the three levels is the level of prescriptive principles: universal judgments about what ought to be desired or done. The second or intermediate level is the level of prescriptive rules about what ought to be desired or done. These are of general, but not universal, applicability. The third and lowest level is the level of prescriptive decisions about what ought to be desired and done in this or that particular case, here and now.

The reasoning involved takes the form of a practical syllogism that is formally the same on all three levels. In each case, the major premise must be a prescriptive judgment about what ought to be desired or done; the minor premise that accompanies it must be a descriptive judgment about a matter of fact that is relevant to what ought to be desired or done. The conclusion reached by such reasoning is always a prescriptive judgment.

It is impossible to draw a prescriptive conclusion from two descriptive premises. From all the knowledge we might ever possess about matters of fact, we can never conclude anything concerning what ought to be desired or done.



Before I proceed to describe the sequence of all three levels of practical reasoning, let me give one example of a practical syllogism—one on the highest level. The major premise is a self-evident universal principle: the prescriptive judgment that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us and nothing else. The minor premise is the descriptive judgment about a fact of human nature: that human beings naturally desire knowledge, which makes knowledge something all human beings need and, therefore, something that is really good for them. From these two practical judgments, we can draw a prescriptive conclusion: the universal judgment that we (all human beings) ought to seek knowledge.

The truth of that practical judgment is in conformity with right desire because the major premise is a self-evidently true prescriptive judgment about right desire itself and the minor premise is a true descriptive judgment about knowledge as something that all human beings naturally desire.

All practical syllogisms on the highest level of practical reasoning have universally true prescriptive principles for their major premise and for their conclusion. On the second or intermediate level, the major premise is a universal prescriptive principle that has already been established as a true conclusion of practical reasoning on the highest level. When that is combined with a descriptive judgment about contingent facts, the conclusion reached is a true general rule.

Then, on the third or lowest level, the true general rules that have been established as conclusions on the second level serve as major premises. Serving as minor premises are descriptive judgments about the facts of particular cases to which the rules apply. The conclusions that can then be drawn are sound practical decisions about what ought to be desired and done in this or that particular case.

The three levels of practical reasoning can be readily exemplified in judicial and jurisprudential thought. The highest level is that of the universal principles of natural law. On the next or intermediate level are the general rules of positive or man-made law in one particular country or another and at one time or another. The rules of positive law vary from place to place and time to time. On the lowest level is the application of those rules of positive law to particular cases that come before judicial tribunals for decision.


We can have certitude in our assertion of practical truth only on the highest level, the level of universal principles. On the intermediate and lowest level—the level of general rules and particular decisions the soundness of the rules and decisions falls within the realm of doubt, less so about the correctness of the general rules than about the rightness of the particular decisions.

The importance of distinguishing between the three levels of practical reasoning and of prescriptive judgment is that it should help us avoid two mistakes that many persons make. One mistake consists in transferring one's doubts about the rightness of particular decisions, about which reasonable persons can disagree, to the universal principles that underlie those decisions and without which those decisions would be unprincipled.

The other mistake consists in regarding the universal principles on the highest level as irrelevant because of difficulties encountered in trying to apply them in making decisions in particular cases. There is no reason to abandon the universal principles of the practical intellect, about which agreement should be expected, because disagreement is unavoidable when reasonable persons argue about whether this or that particular decision is right.

Finally, I must deal briefly with one more distinction within the sphere of the practical intellect. That is the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, which is a distinction between *doing* and *making*.

Thinking about the conduct of one's private life and about one's participation in the institutions and practices of the society in which one lives is thinking about doing, or thinking about one's moral and political actions. But to the extent that any of us exercises an art, technique, or craft to produce useful things or enjoyable objects, the practical thinking we are engaged in is thinking about *making*, not *doing*.

Here the universal principles of art, the general rules for producing a certain kind of work, and the particular decisions that the artist or craftsman must make in the process of production run parallel to the principles, rules, and decisions on the three levels of practical thinking in the sphere of *doing*—the sphere of moral and political action. 

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